

# Filling an urban void as a 'public interior' in Balıkesir; contemporary intervention into historic context through interior space

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## Abstract

The paper argues the role of interior spaces in linking with the urban open space configuration. The interior space is discussed as extensions of urban spaces and urban spaces as extensions of interiors with specific reference to a case study selected in Balıkesir urban fabric. Under the light shed by these discussions, the paper questions the certainty of boundaries between exterior and interior, thus between interior design and architecture. While the first axis of discussion focuses on the duality between interior and exterior, the second axis of discussion concentrates on the insertion of new and contemporary architectural and spatial features into an existing and historic context. The Museum and Library of Photography project in Balıkesir, which is selected as case study, is based on a VOID connecting what exists with what disappeared long ago in a totally new combination. Consequently, paper shows that architectural identity of the existing (and sometimes disappeared) heritage is reproduced via injection of this new hybrid (interior-exterior) into the very heart of the existing urban fabric. The hybrid design of the VOID intends to resolve the tensions between the contrasting features of restoration and intervention merely by understanding the conditions and fundamentals of the process of historical layering in the town.

## Keywords

Interior design, Urban interior, Interior space, Traditional architecture, Architectural intervention.



### 1. The context for insertion of an urban interior

The paper tackles the issue of intervention into urban voids along two main axes. It, firstly, discusses the role of architectural intervention as a means of providing the continuity between exterior and interior spaces. In contrast to the perception of the isolated nature of interior space and the sharp distinction between interior and exterior, it tackles the architectural design of interior spaces as the rooms of the city. In this regard, the paper questions how interior space can become an urban room with reference to a specific as well as unique case study in Balıkesir. In addition to the first axis of discussion this paper, the issue of the 'intervention into urban voids' is also argued as a problem of adding new architecture to the old (or rather historical) context. Indeed, this process of constant addition and natural transformation is an age-old notion of how buildings and cities have evolved. Thus, historic context provides a natural host for constant intervention of spaces towards an accumulation of urban rooms creating an integrated city as can be seen in Nolli's well-known plan for Rome.

Currently, architectural design and conservation are not polarised as it was almost two decades ago. Similarly, professionals in the field of architectural conservation are not as hesitant as they once were in bringing together the new forms and techniques with the remains of traditional heritage. The synthesis of the new with the old have gone through a series of phases in its own process of evolution. Following diverse and complex approaches to the issue of integrating historical with modern in an architectural intervention, both architectural theory and practice seem to have reached a much more simplified, mature and dignified state in this matter. At this final phase, the dichotomy seems to have been clarified with the disposal of its redundant components. It seems to be distilled into its very essence; an 'interior space'. This is a space which can be associated with the metaphor of time-tunnel. It is an accumulation of the layers of history, a palimpsest. Here, the metamorphosis is not



*Figure 1. Drawings of the reconstruction and restoration project.*

only documented but also interpreted for further ramifications towards further transformations. Indeed, today, architectural conservators no longer need to 'avoid' integrating traditional with modern as long as they are connected by means of a 'void'. This void is not merely a space joining two different components, but rather an abstract concept which contains various levels of interaction between traditional with modern in a single entity. This abstract concept will be elucidated in concrete terms with particular reference to the first Photography Museum & Library Building in Turkey (Figure 1).

It can be claimed that any architectural hybrid, proposed within a metamorphosis, would consist of conserved and added features (Byard, 1998). Hence, a design, which attempt to integrate the traditional with the modern components of this hybrid, should tackle the conserved features as the underlying grammatical structure onto which the added features are judiciously and critically integrated (Çetin, 1999). Thus, the VOID appears not only as a musical "l'espace" but also as a translator which transfers or interprets the traditional language onto the contemporary text as much as it does interior space onto an exterior space.

A new paradigm for regenerating the heritage, which can be called as "modern reads (or rewrites) the traditional" based on such a linguistic analogy, is advocated through the construction of the first Museum of Photography of Turkey in Balıkesir. The paper will discuss; not only the design concept in relation to this new paradigm for integrating traditional with modern, but also the architectural features of the emerged hybrid as well as the planning and construction process in which the hybrid is evolved.

Thus, architecture could be conceived as a graft not only between interior and exterior spaces but also between new and old, rather than being conceived as a physical structure that divides and separates exteriors from interiors. Instead, design of interiors are essential elements of architecture whereby they are considered as the core units in shaping of the urban environment as a whole. Various spatial typologies all over the world, such as *hayat* (a special type of sofa) in traditional Turkish civic architecture, *engawa* in Japanese architecture, provide a continuity between interior and exterior. Therefore, any architectural intervention is at the same time an attempt to reconfigure the network of interior spaces within the city context. By the same token, all interior design initiatives accommodate direct consequences in regard to the relationship between exterior spaces.

In this framework, Rem Koolhaas' intervention to the Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venice presents an important example for reusing a historical building and creating a new public (interior/exterior) space in the city. The Fondaco typifies an historical palimpsest of modern substance along with its preservation spanning several centuries of construction techniques. OMA's renovation scheme is based on a series of strategic interventions and vertical circulation elements that support the new building program and a sequence of public spaces and paths. Koolhaas's proposal opens the courtyard piazza to pedestrians, keeping its historical role as a covered urban 'campo' despite it is an interior space.

In the light shed by aforementioned argument on interior-exterior ambiguity, the following case study will epitomize the role of a relatively small spatial arrangement both within the shell of the building in which it is embodied and also outside this shell in communication with the nearby exterior setting.

## **2. Traditional & modern reconciled through a new medium; a space that is both interior and exterior...**

Balikesir town center presents a relatively traditional fabric with its housing units most of which are missing

due to various natural and man-made factors fires etc. Thus, it exhibits a potential for various urban infill projects (Cetin, 2003). The building takes place in a traditional urban context where a grid plan is implemented into the existing organic tissue of the town. The area is composed of two storey houses. Some of these houses are in bad condition but the remaining ones are listed as architectural heritage. The particular void that is chosen as a case study area for this article is a building lot that had been empty for a long time next to a derelict yet traditional building. One of the local associations (BASAF-Balikesir Art Photographers' Association) demanded the building from the city governor on the condition that it is restored and turned into a photography museum for the city. Thus, this specific urban void gained a potential to be converted into a public space. During the restoration and renovation the empty lot (which is defined as the void in this study) is also donated to BASAF and then the project brief and the design were revised to tackle the problem of filling this void as a public space.

Design concept of the case, here, can briefly be summarised as a space connecting conserved and added features of the architectural transformation. However, as mentioned above, this space (void) performs as a translator. Here, the traditional morphology, its forms, tectonics and their relationships, logic, conditions as well as meanings are deciphered and then recoded in a new format containing; new technologies, materials, forms, and meanings. What is essential in such a translation is that this void should pay homage to the former linguistic code or morphological grammar in the overall composition, that is to say, the synthesised end-product which is the transformed building itself.

Here, the traditional grammar is exalted through not only the neutral and humble reinterpretation of a genuine architectural vocabulary, but also the culmination of space as the major integrating component of the overall composition. Therefore, space becomes a device to interpret the underlying grammatical structure as the basis of the new composition.

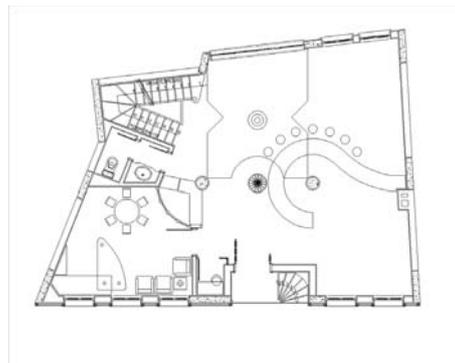
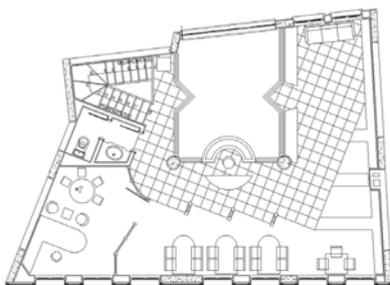
In fact, any architectural intervention can be considered as a linguistic activity that is expressed in a formal grammar and vocabulary. The point, here, is that the outcoming new narrative should be rewritten on a common language. The architectural context should provide a medium in which not only the new narratives, but also what they are based on, that is to say, former stories, their texts, grammar and vocabulary can also be read. Such a void is intended as an instrument to achieve a culturally sustainable transformation.

The sources and principles of such a formal transformation can be searched within the vernacular typology of the local architecture. Following a comprehensive research through the local documents, typical features of the façade typology in Balıkesir could be obtained. The façade of the existing building was documented and restoration drawings were prepared. The reconstruction project was also prepared for the adjoining site (on which a traditional house once existed) on the basis of remaining photographs (Figure 2) and typological knowledge for the façades in the surrounding context. Moreover, if the reinterpretation of Plannimetric Typology with reference to Photography Museum & Library, is analysed, one is faced with a difficulty that there is not any document left to guide us about the spatial organisation of the former house. Therefore, plan typology of the nearby environment had been the major source of inspiration for the intended intervention. Spatial configuration is developed from the central sofa plan typology. Since the sofa was the main distributing space within the

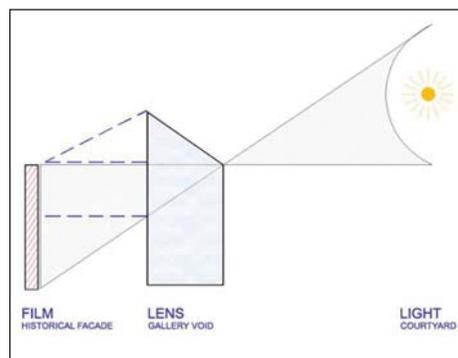


*Figure 2. Remaining photographs displaying the historical façade of the building once existed on the neighbouring lot.*

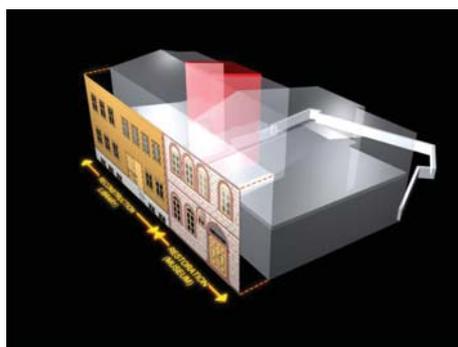
house, the new void was taken as the major space connecting all sub-spaces in different levels of the building with the exterior space (Figure 3). Furthermore, configuration of exterior space in relation to the regulating VOID within the building is of prime importance since the exterior symbolises the future while the façade and plannimetry is associated with the past. Moreover, sofa is a special typology of space which is



*Figure 3. Plan organisation developed from the central sofa typology.*



**Figure 4.** Spatial configuration inspired from the working mechanism of a camera.



**Figure 5.** The Gallery Void performs as a joint uniting old with new both physically and metaphorically.

totally introverted and isolated from the exterior. It connects all other rooms (interior spaces) right in the middle of the building scheme. However, by deliberately re-interpreting and judiciously distorting the archetype of sofa here, the main space (proposed sofa) is connected with the exterior (Figure 3) and the façade facing exterior is made totally transparent (Figure 7) through the use of double-storey high glass surface which also is extended to the roof. In this way, the interior space becomes an extension of urban space and vice versa. Hence, the exterior patio in the back of the building (backyard) becomes a corridor which connects two buildings that are architecturally tackled as one. In sum, all formerly-known definitions of interior - exterior division are turned inside out through this architectural intervention by referring to the typological precedents as mentioned above.

In that sense, the metaphorical use of photography in this spatial configuration constitutes the main theme of the overall architectural intervention. The traditional and the modern features

are integrated through the building content. In other words, the concept of photography became the starting point for designing how new will be added into the old. The working principle of a “camera” is taken not only as a metaphor but also as the major criteria for organising the new urban interior space (once an urban void). As known, beams of light reflected from the image are flown through a prism, that is to say the object lenses of the camera. Here, the light-beams are deflected and converted in order to project the image onto the chemical surface of the film so that the chemical reaction of the light with the film could fix the view of the object. Similarly, the design of the building takes the core interior space (void) of the building as the lenses of a camera, which process the light coming from the exterior courtyard through the two-storey-high glass opening and project this light onto the layer associated with the past, that is the historical (reconstructed) façade (Figure 4). Hence, the light of the future is intended to be superimposed onto the traditional building component (Figure 5). Thus, an unused urban void becomes a new urban/public interior room which connects not only front street to backyard but also the new library to the old museum.

To sum up, the restoration and reconstruction project for Photography Museum & Library attempts to address the issues of regeneration and metamorphosis by a judicious architectural intervention into the neglected architectural heritage through insertion of an ‘urban interior room’ into the existing ‘urban void’. As mentioned at the very beginning, the project is based on a VOID connecting what exists with what disappeared long ago in a totally new combination. Hence, the reconciliation of the “modern” with the “traditional” as well as “exterior” with “interior”, whereby characteristics of the existing heritage is re-abstracted, is intended in order to overcome the dichotomy of “modern versus traditional”. The proposed architectural hybrid consists of conserved and added features. Conserved features are; the remaining building (which is suggested as the museum part) and the façade

of the reconstructed library building. The added features, on the other hand, include; a new building behind the reconstructed façade, a new central (interior/exterior) space and a common backyard, that is revitalised as the exterior space for outdoor activities related to the local association of photography (BASAF) (Figure 6). The design tackles the conserved features as the underlying grammatical structure onto which the added features are specifically and critically integrated.

### 3. The “void” as a spatial medium & its tectonic identity

The proposed intervention to reclaim this derelict urban void via a new set of interior spaces necessitated a critical interpretation of the program components in the building brief. As shortly introduced above, the building brief was composed of two major components; namely the museum and the library that are both dedicated to the field of photography. The physical context was also comprised of two parts; The first was the neglected 19th century building with a wooden skeleton frame structure and mix infill. This building has also a front façade made of cut stone. The second component of the context was an empty building lot which once accommodated a building with wooden structure and wooden front façade. Since, the empty lot was maintaining its legal status as a (heritage) listed building, the intervention should be based on the reconstruction of the building. Thus, the building program was distributed respectively, that is to say, existing building was planned to be restored as the museum while the contemporary addition with a reconstructed front façade was planned to be the Library. Although the building is primarily a reconstruction, it was totally tackled as a new design problem apart from its front façade which was rebuilt as it originally was. As mentioned above, sofa is used as the major element of the spatial configuration. Reading halls and book shelves are organised around this central void. The periphery of this void designed as a transparent surface so as to integrate this void with the backyard lying just behind the void itself. At the



*Figure 6. Backyard connecting the museum and library.*

bottom of this void, a water feature is also introduced not only to accentuate the centrality, but also to recall minor tastes of the traditional atmosphere in a contemporary setting (Figure 7). This small building complex consists of not only a building designed for temporary and permanent exhibitions, but also a library with its reading hall and multi-purpose reception area, as well as seminar rooms, administration rooms, technical areas etc. These two buildings (a reconstructed building and a restored building) are united around a backyard allowing exterior activities. This backyard was also supported with an arcaded café. In sum, the design of this couple of buildings is mainly based on the configuration of a primary VOID in order to connect what currently exists with what disappeared long ago in a totally new combination. The transparency of this space is not only extended towards the backyard but also towards the sky (Figure 8) to further accentuate the experience of being outside while the user is actually inside. Thus, the main space, in other words, the void becomes the lens of a camera which projects the light coming from the courtyard onto the historical surface, in other words, the reconstructed facade, between which guests, in other word, the photographers move creating new layers of art connecting not only tradition with modern, but also interior with exterior.



**Figure 7.** View of the central (urban interior) space from the entrance showing the inverted relationship between interior and exterior .

#### 4. Process of constructing a void as a new room in the city

The mission of spatially reclaiming a void in the tissue of the city due to a once-demolished edifice through insertion of a new building, is tackled as an intervention of transparent and laterally integrated set of interiors rather than through a replacement of a lost building with a new, isolated and purely solid object. The Museum & Library of Photography also became the nucleus of a local movement of urban renewal in Balıkesir through the planning and design process behind the restoration and reconstruction project, as well as the involvement of local non-governmental organisations. The process has started with the allocation of special funds to local administrations by the central government for restoration of local historical heritage. The bureaucrats of the municipality determined a set of buildings and contacted the local university. They were advised to tackle the issue at a broader scale and develop a regeneration model for a street or a district with the coordination of a larger section of the local society including local NGOs and various other parties. Although this initiative was met with a great enthusiasm, the local authorities were unable to organise such a larger scale project. After a year of negotia-



**Figure 8.** The central void the top of which is also transparent to enhance the feeling of being outside within an interior space.

tions, a totally different and small initiative emerged and applied to local authorities to take one of the dilapidated buildings in Balıkesir on the condition of restoring it. The initiative was started by the local Association of Photography (BASAF). Finally, they managed to take the permission to restore and use a 19th century building which was once used as a dormitory. The building was used for various purposes which led to its dilapidation and its fast deterioration. It represents the characteristics of the vernacular architecture. The association, which did not have any financial source at all, developed various contacts and activities to attract the people and institution, who are interested in photography, in order to find finance for the restoration of the building. Several businessmen and institutions made donations to contribute to the construction. Moreover, at the final stages of the project they started a campaign to finance the construction. Along this route, the mayor, who owned the next building lot, decided to donate the lot on the condition that the building (once existed there) would be reconstructed. Then the project was expanded to design a building complex including a museum and a library and workshop. Afterwards, the project was promoted in various sections of the

press and media. After the first phase of the project and the construction of the additional building was completed, it provided great publicity within the city. It also made an important impact in the nearby environment. The front of the building which was a small parking lot was converted to a tiny square, in which various public cultural activities, such as exhibitions and concerts, are organised (Figure 9). Thus, the new building (or the new interior spatial configuration) acted as a filter between the open urban spaces both in the front and the back of the new building couple (library and museum). Furthermore, few more historical buildings were also restored on the same street. Thus, the very first suggestion was realised on its own with the initiatives of the local NGOs. Hence, the current socio-economic activity of the town was meeting with the (once neglected) historical heritage of the town. Socio-cultural and economic dimensions of the intervention into the historical setting seem to manifest themselves in the configuration of spatial program around the central void. Therefore, one can assert that a void is essential in integration various dimensions of traditional with modern as well as those of interior and exterior spaces.

## 5. Discussion

The paper discusses the role of interior spaces in constructing the urban environment. It further raises the issue of space as the major regulating force in the conservation of and intervention into historical contexts ranging from a single space to larger scales. It also contributes to the literature by unveiling the theoretical background of a small scale application in a small town of Western Asia. It might be assumed that any architectural hybrid (interior/exterior, historical/contemporary), injected into an ongoing metamorphosis, would consist of conserved and added features. Museum and Library of Photography in Balıkesir, as a design which attempt to integrate the traditional with the modern components of this hybrid, tackles the conserved features as the underlying grammatical structure onto which the added features are judiciously and critically integrated. Thus,



**Figure 9.** Frontyard of the building was converted to a public square.

the VOID appears also as a translator which transfers or interprets the traditional language onto the contemporary text. Therefore, the building elucidated above (as an epitom of interior-exterior reversion) represents a new paradigm for regenerating the heritage, which can be called as “modern reads (or rewrites) the traditional” based on such a linguistic analogy. Consequently, architectural identity of the existing (and sometimes disappeared) heritage is reproduced via injection of this new hybrid into the very heart of the existing urban fabric. The design of the VOID intends to resolve the tensions between the contrasting features of restoration and intervention merely by understanding the conditions and fundamentals of the process of historical layering in the town.

The above-studied case is a typical manifestation of how a deliberate attempt to twist the cannons of architectural typology in regard to the rigid definition of exterior-interior disinction would regenerate a spatial continuum (as in the case of Rome as depicted by Nolli’s plan) whereby the boundaries between interior and exterior are evaporated. Consequently, the analytical re-reading of the daily experience of interior-exterior unity within the photography museum and the library complex in Balıkesir shows how judicious articulation of interior architecture accommodates a potential to transform the boundaries of a professional discipline (such as architecture) by filling an urban void via an interior space, and thus, turning a semi-urban space into an enclosed yet expanded public interior room.

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